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It's time to raise fuel economy standards

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For 30 years, attempts to raise fuel economy standards for U.S. passenger cars have been handily beaten back. But change may be in the wind.

Presently, to meet CAFE (corporate average fuel economy) standards, an auto company's car lineup must average 27.5 miles per gallon. Advocates of higher standards are supporting an increase to 33 mpg for both cars and light trucks by 2015.

Opposition arose from the usual sources — congressmen and senators representing automobile manufacturing areas, vehicle manufacturers and the United Auto Workers union. And, of course, oil companies weren't too keen on the idea, either.

But the times — spurred by \$3-per-gallon gasoline — they are a-changin'.

To the surprise of many, James J. Mulva, chairman and chief executive of ConocoPhillips, recently endorsed tougher fuel economy standards. "There's been enough finger-pointing for a long period of time that we need to improve the efficiency of transportation fuels," said Mulva, whose oil company is the fifth-largest in the world.

Dan Becker, director of the global warming program of the Sierra Club, agrees. "I think we have reached an important point in the debate when an oil executive calls for better fuel economy," Becker said. "It's like a tobacco executive calling for reduced smoking."

Recently, even hard-core oppositionists in Washington are climbing on the CAFE bandwagon, and the Bush administration has lately been saying nice things about it.

Bush recently exercised his presidential powers to increase the fuel economy standards for light trucks, and wants the same power over automobile standards. Opponents fear, however, that such a move may result in lower-than-effective standards, a frequent criticism of Bush's light-truck standards.

The standard-raising is not a cure-all to high gas prices, and will take an excruciatingly long time to show significant results. But now's the time to act, because we've seen that it's nearly impossible to get government to act on fuel economy when oil is relatively cheap.

Higher standards now could even help Detroit automakers compete. Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., chairman of the House Science Committee, told the New York Times recently that adopting higher fuel standards now would send a signal to auto companies that investments in new tooling and technology to produce high-mileage vehicles will produce benefits for years to come, and stimulate new ideas. That could help U.S. auto

makers.

Kateri Callahan, president of the Alliance to Save Energy, told the Times that falling gasoline prices illustrate the value of the standards. “What you’re doing with CAFE is saying, as a society, there’s a minimum level of fuel efficiency that we think ought to be offered,” she said. “History shows that when, and if, energy is cheap again, and people fall back into old and bad habits, you want to make sure they can act only so badly.”

Painful recent history at the gas pumps tells us that’s an excellent reason for Congress to act soon on establishing workable and meaningful new fuel economy standards.